

Appendix C: Hepatitis C (HCV) Fact Sheet

What is hepatitis C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). The disease progresses over years, even decades, and can lead to cirrhosis (liver scarring), liver cancer, and liver failure. It is the most common bloodborne disease in the United States and the leading cause of liver transplants. It is estimated that 1.8 percent of the population, or more than 4.1 million Americans, have the disease.

What are the symptoms of hepatitis C?

Symptoms may include:

- Jaundice (yellowing of skin or eyes)
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever
- Tiredness
- Headache
- Stomach pain
- Dark urine

Symptoms usually appear 2 weeks to 6 months after exposure; however, most people (as many as 80%) experience no symptoms or vague symptoms. It is important to remember that asymptomatic individuals can still infect others. About 85 percent of people who become infected with HCV will become chronic (long-term) carriers.

How is hepatitis C spread?

HCV is spread primarily by direct contact with human blood and body fluids. HCV is not spread by casual contact, such as touching or sharing eating and drinking utensils. You may have been exposed to HCV if:

- You ever injected street drugs, as the needles and/or other drug “works” used to prepare or inject the drug(s) may have been contaminated with blood.
- You received blood, blood products, or solid organ transplants before 1992 from a donor whose blood contained HCV. (Blood has been screened for HCV since 1992.)
- You ever received long-term kidney dialysis.
- You were ever a health care worker who had frequent contact with blood or had an accidental needle stick injury.
- Your mother had HCV at the time she gave birth to you. During birth, her blood may have gotten into your body.
- You ever shared personal items, such as razors or toothbrushes, with someone who had HCV.
- You ever had sex with someone who had HCV.
- You ever received a tattoo from a noncommercial or unregulated facility that may have used dirty needles or poor sanitary practices.

Who is at risk for HCV?

- IV drug users
- Health care workers
- People who have multiple sex partners
- Homeless people
- Military veterans

How will I know if I have hepatitis C?

See your health care provider. Hepatitis C is diagnosed through blood tests, and your health care provider may recommend that you be tested for hepatitis C based on your symptoms (if any) and any risk factors you may have.

How is hepatitis C treated?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved treatments including interferon or a combination therapy of ribavarin and interferon as the most current standard of treatment. Your health care provider will decide which treatment options are best for you.

Is there a vaccine for hepatitis C?

Currently, there is no vaccine for hepatitis C. However, if you have hepatitis C, you should be vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B to prevent those infections.

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